

Representations of Veterans after the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

Kim Theriault
Dominican University

An instructional resource prepared for the 2016 NEH Summer Institute on Veterans in Society

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, designed by Maya Lin, was a catalyst for the reconciliation of the Vietnam War in America. Built in 1982, at the advent of the contemporary art period, this artwork is Postmodern in nature because it rejects grand narratives, ideologies, and singular interpretations. Rather, its somber experiential space has allowed for personal interactions that have influenced veterans, especially their perceptions of themselves, and, because of what transpires there, others' perceptions of them. The abstract quality of the memorial and its postmodern nature is in opposition to many figural, media, and fictional visual representations of veterans, many of which force the veteran to fit into rigid, singular interpretations rather than recognize that they are multi-faceted human beings. This module will look at select visual representations of "veteran" in the contemporary era.

1. What does a veteran look like?

Image Pair A

Vietnam Veterans Memorial
Maya Lin

The Three Servicemen
Frederick Hart

Image Pair B

Vietnam Veterans Memorial
Maya Lin

Vietnam Women's Memorial
Glenna Goodacre

FOUNDATION

The purpose of this group is to establish a baseline understanding of preconceived notions of the veteran by asking which of the pair is more representative of "veteranness." The idea here is to analyze both works with the participants and compare representational vs. figural as it forms a rigid or fluid understanding of the veteran. The point is to encourage the open representation offered by the memorial, in preparation for the next set of images.

Learning Objective:

Participants consider how veterans are represented visually and understand those stereotypes.

READING

Participants will read together in class: Arthur Danto's "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial" (originally written for *The Nation* in 1985) and discuss key points. How does memorializing a "lost" war influence our perspective on veterans from that war? How do we honor ourselves with such memorials? Additional resources include selections from *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision* (1994) and Margaret R. Laware, "'Welcome Home

Brother!': (Re)membering Masculine Identities at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial” and Kim Theriault, “Go Away Little Girl: Gender, Race, and Controversy in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.” Are veterans represented as stereotypically strong, solely male, and white?

2. How has the contemporary meaning of veteran developed?

Image Sequence

Images of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial that show the inscribed names and reflections of individuals and visits by veterans.

*I suggest that each individual image is printed up or projected separately in different areas of the room, and students examine and take notes on one of them.

*They should describe what they see and think is occurring—who is the veteran? How can they tell?

FOUNDATION

The purpose of these images is to consider how the names of the dead on the memorial— none of whom are veterans because they are deceased— represent, impact, and engage living veterans. We also discuss what becomes of the viewer in this relationship. Is the viewer a voyeur into an intimate moment? What becomes of the viewer when each recognizes his/her reflection is superimposed upon the memorial? This will be accomplished by examining recorded interactions between veterans and the memorial.

Learning Objective:

Participants consider how veterans are represented psychologically and understand the proliferation of the veteran as outsider.

READING

This section includes readings from Lydia Fish *The Last Firebase* and Chapters 17 & 18 in Jonathan Shay’s *Odysseus in America*. The emphasis on individual Vietnam veteran responses, instigated by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, serve to give voice to a particular veteran experience. Also, using the Shay reading, we will talk about what seems to be an inseparable connection of veterans to PTSD, moral injury, and psychological wounding.

3. How is the real-life veteran portrayed in “real-life” media?

Images/Video

Frontline “Vietnam Memorial” PBS Video, 1983/1988
National Geographic Vol. 167, No. 5 (May 1985): 552+

FOUNDATION

These selections of early reports and imagery at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial helped to portray veterans in a very public forum. The readings give a background as to why the memorial

happened at the particular point in history that it did and how the images of veterans, particularly those determined in Section 2 above, might have served other purposes.

Learning Objective:

Participants consider how representations of veterans can be used in such a way as to further the agendas of others—political, “feel-good,” or others.

READING

Have images of veterans, and their plights, been co-opted and used for particular political agendas? How has the dissemination of facts and images of events affected their representation? This is explored through the following readings and discussions related to them. John E. Bodnar, “The Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* 3-12 and Patrick Hagopian, “A ‘Dangerous Political Issue’ The War about Memory in 1982,” *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing*, 111-139

4. How has the veteran been portrayed in fictionalized media?

Video

China Beach (1991) Season 4 Episodes 16 & 17, “Hello Goodbye” (Parts 1 & 2) *Hamburger Hill* (1987)

Learning Objective:

How have fictional accounts of veterans influenced factual understanding of them?

FOUNDATION

While there is a great deal of research completed that addresses the Vietnam veteran in film, which has largely informed public perceptions of veterans (i.e. *Rambo*), this section focuses on representations of fictional veterans at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

READING

Why are these visits included in the storyline? How are they included? Since the memorial was built a decade after the war concluded for most of these characters, when do they visit and why does that length of time elapse? How do these fictional representations compare to those produced by news organizations or witnessed by viewers? These questions are supplemented by Marita Sturken “The Wall and Screen Memory: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*, 44-84.

Ideally, this unit will provide ideas about the fluidity of representations of veterans. The Postmodern conception of images is one largely determined by individual experience— both of the veteran and members of society. If not all resources are available, others can be substituted including more contemporary versions and YouTube clips.